

Psychological First Aid: Building Resiliency for “Us” and “Them”

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In Crisis Situations, Stress Response Is A Normal Reaction



How Common is Post-disaster Stress?

- 7 - 40% of people have emotional or psychological reaction (this includes first responders)
- Majority of people experience at least one type of stress symptom
- Symptoms peak within the first year (often in the 1st few months), only a minority continue to have long-term problems

Challenge to Helpers

- Being part of the collective crisis
- Repeated exposure to grim experiences
- Carrying out physically difficult, exhausting or dangerous tasks
- Lacking sleep and feeling fatigued
- Facing the perceived inability to ever do enough

Dr. George Everly's 21st Century Disaster Worker Burnout Club

- Be a perfectionist, never accept excellence.
- Never exercise!
- Remember, the glass is always half empty! Empathize with ALL disaster victims, you MUST "feel their pain."

Dr. George Everly's 21st Century Disaster Worker Burnout Club

- Eat as much "fast food" as possible; only eat things that had faces (chickens don't count--no lips). Never eat breakfast. If forced to do so, purge!
- Blame all of your failures in life on your parents, your lack of friends, your coercive unethical money-grubbing outsourcing capitalistic boss, or the great right-wing conspiracy.

Dr. George Everly's 21st Century Disaster Worker Burnout Club

- Accept responsibility for everything and everyone, all the time!
- Engage in an endless process of controlling everything and everyone, especially those people/ things over which you have no actual control. It is YOUR responsibility to make all disaster victims "happy."

Dr. George Everly's 21st Century Disaster Worker Burnout Club

- Strive to sleep as little as possible!
- NEVER desire to return home, if forced to do so, feel guilty.
- Seek out a routine: Sleep until you are hungry, eat until you are tired; use ETOH to relax, stimulants to get going.

Psychological First Aid (PFA)

"A supportive and compassionate presence designed to reduce acute psychological distress and/or facilitate continued support, if necessary."

Everly, GS, Jr. & Flynn, BW. (2005). Principles and Practice of Psychological First Aid. Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health Preparedness.

Caring for Psychological Wounds

- All of us can apply a bandage to a wound
- All of us can practice basic first-aid
- The psychological impact of crisis can be approached in a similar manner
- Public health professionals must recognize and be able to manage the basic symptoms of psychological distress

Why Psychological First Aid is the Foundation of Communication

- Communication during disaster situations involves the understanding and management of individual, group and population emotional and cognitive reactions

Why Psychological First Aid is the Foundation of Communication

- Understanding how and why people behave during emergencies allows for improved communication
- If we don't address the emotional bleeding- we can't have a discussion

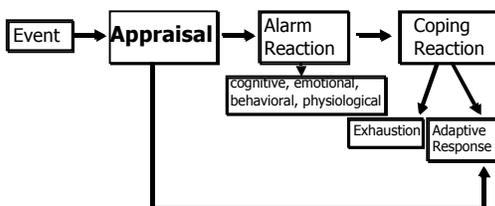
If The Oxygen Mask Drops, Place The Mask On Your Face First....

- Caring for yourself is critical
- Psychological First Aid for others is not possible if you are an emotional casualty
- Bottom line: Your stress response in a crisis can turn you into a liability

The Culprit Is Stress But If We Can't Find It, We Can't Fix It...

- Subjective internal feeling of discomfort
- Impact on emotions, cognitions, physiological functioning, and behavior
- Adaptive in evolutionary sense
 - Fight or flight response
 - BUT can have negative impact

Stress Is A Process Determined By Appraisal....



Appraisal Of Events

Situation	Appraisal	Response
Stuck in traffic	I'm going to be late I should have left earlier	Nervous Irritable Anxious
	I might as well get comfortable 'cause there's nothing I can do about it	Relax Enjoy music

Appraisal Of Events

- Events can be categorized on two dimensions:
 - Important Unimportant
 - Changeable Unchangeable

Appraisal Of Events In Crisis Settings

- Important - Changeable
 - Attending to distressed children
 - Attending to distressed co-workers
 - Assessing extent of damage to school
 - Fatigue
 - Poor sleep

Appraisal Of Events In Crisis Settings

- Unimportant – Changeable
 - Phone solicitors
 - Errands
 - Laundry, yard work, etc.
 - Kids bickering

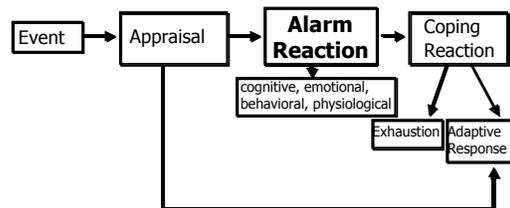
Appraisal Of Events In Crisis Settings

- Important - Unchangeable
 - Injury or death to children, colleagues
 - Destruction of school
 - Hurricanes, tornados
 - Terrorist attack

Appraisal Of Events In Crisis Settings

- Unimportant – Unchangeable
 - Traffic jams
 - Spilled food on clothes
 - Stranger’s criticism

Appraisal Leads To Reaction...



Stress Response: The Spectrum Of Symptoms



Recognizing Symptoms is Critical

- A broad range of stress related symptoms
- Varying manifestations
- Stress symptoms often discounted or perceived as unrelated to stress
- Acknowledgment of stress related symptoms is necessary if management is to take place

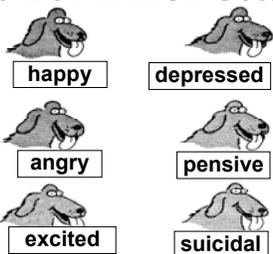
Physical Symptoms



Physical Symptoms

- Muscle aches
- Fatigue
- GI distress
- Headache
- Dermatitis
- Dizziness

Sometimes It Would Be Better To Be An Irish Setter



How to recognize the moods of an Irish Setter

Cognitive/Emotional Symptoms

- Trouble remembering things
- Easily distracted, poor concentration
- Lack of interest in things
- Hopelessness, "nothing will ever get better"

Cognitive/Emotional Symptoms

- Irritability
- Depressed, morose, brooding
- Worry, nervousness, anxiety
- Anger easily

Behavioral Symptoms

- Increased or decreased appetite
- Increased alcohol and drug use
- Increased smoking
- Less efficient on the job
- Isolate self
- Yell, scream, physical aggression

Stress Response: Children

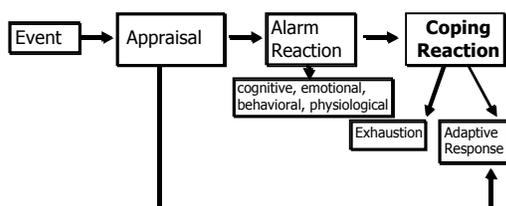
- Behavior problems
- Emotional symptoms
- Nightmares
- Fighting with friends
- School difficulties
- Trouble eating or sleeping
- Physical complaints



Recognizing Symptoms Is Critical

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- Varying manifestations
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Coping Strategies Largely Determine Outcomes...



Common Coping Errors:

- Blaming others
- Deciding to resist
- Victim behavior
- Being inflexible
- Blaming the job
- Over-controlling
- Slowing down
- Fear of Failure, Change, Future
- Checking out Mentally
- Denial
- Choose wrong battles

Activity

- List 3 strengths that help protect you in times of stress

Psychological First Aid For The Self

- Step 1: Recognize symptoms
- Step 2: Identify source(s)
- Step 3: Intervene
 - Change the situation
 - Change your thoughts about the situation
 - Change your physiological stress response

Step 1: Recognize Symptoms

- Symptoms may be subtle or pronounced:
 - Emotional
 - Cognitive
 - Behavioral
 - Physical

Step 2: Identify The Source

- What are the symptoms telling me?
- Where is this coming from?

Step 3: Intervene

- Break task down into “bite-sized” pieces:
 - Set reasonable goals
 - Create an action plan for each situation
 - Focus on what you can vs. can’t do
 - Write about your feelings
 - Seek support and talk about your feelings

Step 3: Intervene

- Break task down into “bite-sized” pieces:
 - Use relaxation/breathing to reduce stress response
 - Tell yourself to let it go, it is not important, not worth getting worked up over
 - If this doesn’t work, efficiently change your situation

Yes... Breathing Works...

- Time out for breathing.....

Prevention

- Incorporate relaxation/breathing techniques into your workday
- Meditation, yoga, quiet time (no TV, radio, etc)

Prevention

- Avoid “avoidance” as a strategy
- Think about stress as something to be managed, not eliminated
- Recognize that your stress level affects those around you

Prevention

- Use good prevention/”inoculation” strategies
 - Exercise
 - Eat right
 - Get enough sleep
 - Quit smoking, decrease alcohol intake

Psychological First Aid For Others



Most people will not have long-term psychological problems after a crisis but, recovery times vary, and some people may still struggle years later.

Complicating Factors

- Exposure to death and injury
 - Identifying with victims
- No prior crisis experience
- Exposure to hazards and long hours
 - Resistance to relief shifts
 - Extreme environments (weather, toxins, debris)

Complicating Factors

- Emotionally challenging work
- Prior psychological adjustment
- Avoidance of help

The Special Case Of PTSD

- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) characterized by three symptom clusters:
 - Re-experiencing (nightmares, flashbacks)
 - Avoidance or emotional numbing
 - Physiological Arousal (exaggerated startle response, hypervigilance)

The Special Case Of PTSD

- Symptoms present for more than 1 month
- Lifetime prevalence rates: roughly 8% of US adults
- Rates vary greatly in disaster studies (2-50% of people)
- PTSD requires professional intervention

Applying The Basics Of Psychological First Aid



Attend To Basic Physical Needs

- Food, clothing, shelter, medical care
 - Addressing these needs will reduce distress

Provide Emotional Support

- Console
- Allow individual to talk about their feelings if they choose to do so
- Listen

Provide Social Support

- Reunite individual with family, friends, community to re-establish social network

Talking With Children

- Allow them to explain their understanding of events
 - Look for misunderstandings
- Allow questions
 - It is okay to say you don't know an answer
 - Remain open to further questions at a later time

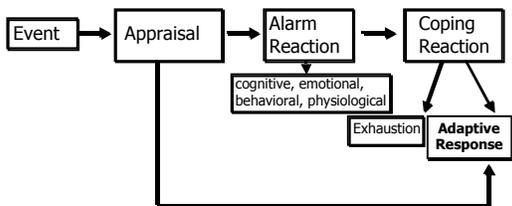
Talking With Children

- Ages 5-10
 - Focus on positive aspects of recovery
 - Address rumors or fears
- Ages 11 and up
 - Similar guidelines as you would use with adults
 - Be careful not to make children confidants

Referral For Additional Help

- People may be reluctant
 - Use supportive communication
 - VOLUNTARY debriefings
 - Provide confidential access and referral information
 - Support at-risk individuals

Psychological First Aid For You and For Others... Adaptive Response Is The Ultimate Goal



“Nobel souls, through dust and heat, rise from disaster and defeat the stronger”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Resources

- **Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS)**
www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/progguide.asp
- **American Red Cross**
www.redcross.org/services/disaster.html
- **American Psychological Association**
www.apa.org
- **South Central Center**
www.southcentralpartnership.org